What Ifs of Jewish History

From Abraham to Zionism

Edited by

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld

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What Ifs of Jewish History

What if the Exodus had never happened? What if the Jews of Spain had not been expelled in 1492? What if Eastern European Jews had never been confined to the Russian Pale of Settlement? What if Adolf Hitler had been assassinated in 1939? What if a Jewish state had been established in Uganda instead of Palestine? Gavriel D. Rosenfeld's pioneering anthology examines how these and other counterfactual questions would have affected the course of Jewish history. Featuring essays by sixteen distinguished scholars in the field of Jewish Studies, *What Ifs of Jewish History* is the first volume to systematically apply counterfactual reasoning to the Jewish past. Written in a variety of narrative styles, ranging from the analytical to the literary, the essays cover three thousand years of dramatic events and invite readers to indulge their imaginations and explore how the course of Jewish history might have been different.

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INTRODUCTION: COUNTERFACTUAL HISTORY AND THE JEWISH IMAGINATION

Gavriel D. Rosenfeld

Throughout history, Jews have been known to kvetch. A well-known example of Jewish petulance appears in Chapter 16 of the Book of Exodus. At this juncture in the biblical narrative, the Israelites have just begun to make their way out of Egypt following the destruction of Pharaoh's army in the Sea of Reeds (Figure 1). Having regained their freedom, they jubilantly sing a song of praise to God for delivering them from their enemies. Struggles lie ahead, however, for the Israelites have only begun their long trek to the Promised Land. Three days into their journey, they start to lose patience. The wilderness is bleak, they have no water, and they start to "grumble . . . against Moses, saying, 'What shall we drink?'" Aware of the challenge to his leadership, Moses turns to God for help and is soon guided to an oasis "where there were twelve springs of water and seventy palm trees." The Israelites proceed to drink their fill and their anger is temporarily appeased. But they soon begin to grumble once again, this time about the lack of food. Fearing imminent starvation, the "whole Israelite community" loudly laments: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots, when we ate our fill of bread!"[1]

The exclamation is dramatic – indeed, hyperbolic – and demands interpretation. Do the Israelites really wish they had died at an earlier point in time back in Egypt? Do they really wish they had never lived to see their way to freedom? Knowing what we do about the subsequent course of events and the Israelites' triumphant arrival in the Promised Land, we may surmise that the exclamation is not intended to be taken literally. But then what does it mean? In seeking to

Figure 1. *The Crossing of the Red Sea* (1633–4), oil on canvas, painting by Nicolas Poussin. The first historical counterfactual that appears in the Hebrew Bible involves the Israelites complaining that they would have been better off had they decided to stay in Egypt instead of departing for the Promised Land.

understand the passage, we have a variety of interpretations to choose from. We may see the passage as a sign of the Jewish people's penchant for complaining, as a reflection of their strained relationship with Moses, or as proof of their difficulty in trusting God. All of these are plausible readings. But there is another way to understand the passage, and that is to recognize it as the first counterfactual historical reference in the Hebrew Bible.

Analyzing the passage by focusing on its counterfactual phrasing allows a range of insights. The first and most important involves its function. At the most basic level, the Israelites' exclamation about their precarious present contains an implicit assumption about an alternate past; it suggests that the course of history would have been better had they stayed in Egypt. It is questionable, of course, whether the Israelites really believe this to be true; indeed, their outburst is likely intended to serve the rhetorical purpose of exaggerating the magnitude of their suffering and amplifying their cry for help in the wilderness. Regardless of the sentiment that lies behind it, the Israelites' exclamation reveals

an important fact about all counterfactual claims: they are "presentist" in the sense that they reflect contemporary concerns. The particular passage from Exodus illustrates how discontent with the present can prompt fantasies about improving the past. Yet, the opposite can also be true: a sense of satisfaction with the present can encourage visions of the past turning out worse. An excellent example of this alternative impulse appeared centuries after the Israelites' departure from Egypt, during the Middle Ages, with the composition of the famous song, "Dayenu." Traditionally chanted at the Passover Seder, the fourteen-verse song celebrates God for delivering the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, repeatedly affirming in hypothetical fashion that if God had been of less assistance – for example, if he had "brought us before Mount Sinai but not given us the Torah" – it "still would have been enough for us." The message is clear: in reciting the different ways in which the course of history might have turned out worse, those who sing the song express gratitude for their present-day reality.

These two examples from the Jewish religious tradition show how pivotal events in history – in this case, the Israelites' liberation from slavery – can inspire counterfactual speculation. Yet, while these observations help us understand the speculative character of the passage from Exodus, a fundamental question remains unanswered: what, indeed, would have happened if the Israelites had stayed in Egypt?

To ask this question is to open the floodgates of the imagination and delve into a vast universe of historical possibility known as counterfactual history. The question of how the Israelites would have fared had they never left Egypt is particularly evocative and allows for many different scenarios. But it is merely one of many hypothetical questions that loom large in Jewish history: What if the Israelites' descendants, the Jews of Judea, had never witnessed the destruction of the Second Temple? What if the Jews of late medieval Spain had never been expelled from their homeland in 1492? What if the Jews of Russia had never been confined to the Pale of Settlement? What if the Jews of Europe had never died in the Holocaust? What if the state of Israel had been established in Uganda instead of Palestine? How would Jewish history have been different?

In addressing these and other speculative questions, *What Ifs of Jewish History* breaks new ground in being the first study to systematically apply counterfactual reasoning to the Jewish past. Up until now, scholars in the field of Jewish Studies have shied away from the

field of counterfactual history. This aversion is puzzling. As the list of questions above makes clear, the Jewish historical record hardly lacks for captivating "what if?" scenarios. One would think that Jewish historians would be eager to explore such scenarios, moreover, given the surging popularity of counterfactual history in recent years. Within the humanities and social sciences in general, and the field of history in particular, scholars have begun to set aside longstanding biases and employ "what if?" questions in their academic work. The wave of academic and popular studies that have been published in recent years clearly shows that counterfactual history has left the margins for the scholarly mainstream.[2] This being the case, one would expect that Jewish historians and other scholars would have begun to follow the example of their colleagues in other disciplines and started speculating about the Jewish past. Until now, however, they have largely refrained from doing so. The question is, why?

Historicizing counterfactual history

In order to understand the late arrival of Jewish historians to counterfactual history, it helps to historicize the field itself. Counterfactual history has been defined in different ways, but it is essentially a genre of narrative representation that offers speculative answers to "what if?" questions in specific historical settings.[3] These narratives typically come in two varieties. Some take the form of sober analytical essays and are mostly produced by historians and other scholars; others assume more dramatic expression in the form of novels, short stories, plays, and films. Both kinds of narrative can be classified as works of counterfactual history, but scholars often describe the latter as belonging to the literary subgenre of "alternate history."[4] These stylistic differences notwithstanding, there is considerable overlap between works of counterfactual and alternate history. Both strive to show how the alteration of a variable in the historical record would have changed the overall course of events.[5] This variable is typically called a "point of divergence" and includes many kinds of occurrences: the deaths of kings and politicians, the occurrence of decisive military victories or defeats, and the rise of grand cultural and religious movements.[6] In speculating about how these variables might have changed the historical record, counterfactual histories typically proceed in one of two directions: they imagine

history taking either a turn for the better or a turn for the worse.[7] Counterfactual histories thus usually assume the form of fantasy and nightmare scenarios. President John F. Kennedy escaping assassination in 1963 is a familiar example of the first, while the Nazis winning World War II is the most famous example of the second.

These scenarios – and countless others like them – are undeniably provocative, but they beg a larger question: why do we ask "what if?" in the first place? Not surprisingly, counterfactual speculation is driven by many different motives. These motives vary considerably depending on who is doing the speculating. Among scholars, however, asking "what if?" serves several important analytical purposes. To begin with, scholars employ counterfactual reasoning to better understand the forces of historical causality. Although historians are often loath to admit it, "what if?" questions are indispensable for determining why events happen. Whenever we make the causal claim that "x caused y," we implicitly affirm that "y would not have occurred in the absence of x."[8] To cite one well-known event, the assertion that the United States Air Force's dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945 enabled the country to defeat Japan in World War II is closely related to the counterfactual claim that if the bombs had not been dropped, the Allies might not have emerged victorious in the Pacific theater. Such claims help underscore the contingent nature of historical events and challenge the impulse to view them as preordained. Indeed, they reveal that counterfactual history is informed by a mindset that stands opposed to historical determinism.[9] For this reason, choice rather than inevitability stands at the center of all "what if?" scenarios.

This fact explains a second reason why scholars employ counterfactual scenarios: to make moral judgments in interpreting historical events. It is difficult to judge the morality of an action without being aware of what might have happened had it not occurred. The longstanding scholarly debate about whether the atomic bombs *should* have been dropped on Japan has long been inseparable from the question of how history might have unfolded had they not been. Would the war have dragged on longer? Would more Americans, and perhaps even more Japanese, have died as a result? Would the course of history, in short, have been better or worse? The answer to this basic question, which is one that lurks behind all counterfactual premises, helps determine how the past is judged – as morally justified, according to those

who believe history would have been worse without the bombs, or as immoral, according to those who believe the opposite.

The third and perhaps primary reason why we ask "what if?" lies in the broader area of human psychology. It is in our very nature as human beings to wonder "what if?" At various junctures in our lives, we may speculate about what might have happened if certain events had or had not occurred in our past: what if we had lived in a different place, attended a different school, taken a different job, married a different spouse? When we ask such questions, we are really expressing our feelings about the present. We are either grateful that things worked out as they did, or we regret that they did not occur differently. The same concerns are involved in the realm of counterfactual history. Counterfactual history explores the past less for its own sake than to utilize it instrumentally to comment upon the state of the contemporary world. When the producers of counterfactual histories imagine how the past might have been different, they invariably express their own subjective hopes and fears.[10] Fantasy scenarios, for example, envision the alternate past as superior to the real past and thereby typically express a sense of dissatisfaction with the way things are today. Nightmare scenarios, by contrast, depict the alternate past as inferior to the real past and thus usually articulate a sense of contentment with the status quo.[11]

Counterfactual fantasies and nightmares, moreover, have different political implications. Fantasies tend to be liberal, for by imagining a better past, they implicitly indict the present and express a desire to change it. Harry Turtledove and Richard Dreyfus' 1996 novel, *The Two Georges*, is a good example of this sentiment, because in portraying how the defeat of the American Revolution in 1776 would have improved the course of American history, the text critiqued the United States' many domestic problems in the early 1990s. Nightmares, by contrast, tend to be conservative, for by portraying the alternate past in negative terms, they ratify the present as the best of all possible worlds and discourage the need for change. Noel Coward's 1947 play, *Peace in Our Time*, by imagining the brutality of a Nazi invasion and the occupation of Great Britain, vindicated the country's real historical triumph over the Third Reich as its "finest hour" and endorsed the postwar order upon which it was based. These political implications, to be sure, are not ironclad and should not be viewed deterministically. Nightmare scenarios can also be used for the liberal purpose of critique, as was true of Philip Roth's 2004 novel, *The Plot Against America*, whose portrait of

America turning to fascism under President Charles Lindbergh served as an indictment of the administration of President George W. Bush. Fantasy scenarios, meanwhile, can express conservative dissatisfaction with the present, as with Newt Gingrich's *Gettysburg* trilogy of counterfactual Civil War novels, which served to criticize "big government" after the turn of the millennium.[12] Regardless of their precise political function, counterfactual histories typically explore the past with an eye toward present-day agendas.

Given the innate appeal of wondering "what if?," it is no surprise to learn that counterfactual history has distant origins. Speculating about the past dates back to classical antiquity and the historiographical traditions of the Greco-Roman world. The first documented counterfactual assertion appears in the work of the Greek historian Herodotus (born *ca.* 484 BCE).[13] In his account of the Persian Wars, he famously speculated that "had the Athenians . . . quitted their country . . . [and] submitted to the power of Xerxes . . . the Lacedaemonians [the fighters of Sparta] would have . . . stood alone . . . and died nobly . . . or else . . . come to terms with King Xerxes . . . either . . . way, Greece would have been brought under Persia." This assertion functioned as a nightmare scenario for the purpose of validating history as it really happened (the Greeks won) and glorifying the Athenians as the "true saviors of Greece."[14] Later historians, by contrast, demonstrated a different perspective. A case in point is Thucydides (born *ca.* 460 BCE) who, in his famous *History of the Peloponnesian War*, made nearly two dozen counterfactual observations pertaining to the conflict's course, writing, for example, that "if Alcibiades had not restrained the fleet from sailing on Athens, the enemies of Athens surely would have occupied Ionia and the Hellespont immediately."[15] This observation (and others like it) served as a fantasy scenario reflecting the sense of regret on the part of the famed historian (who was a general on the losing side of the war) that events did not go better for the Athenians. Four centuries later, a similar impulse inspired the Roman historian Tacitus (56–117 CE) to speculate that if the legendary Roman general Germanicus had not died prematurely and instead lived to become emperor, "he would have outstripped Alexander in military fame as far as he surpassed him in gentleness, in self-command and in other noble qualities."[16] Written by a scholar who was convinced of the degeneracy of his age, Tacitus' remark about Germanicus resembled Thucydides' in wishing history's course had transpired otherwise. Surpassing all of these scholars in

imaginative power, however, was the Roman historian Livy (59 BCE – 17 CE), who in his monumental study of ancient Rome, *Ab Urbe Condita*, provided a long and elaborate answer to the rhetorically powerful question, "what would have been the consequence . . . [for] the Romans, if they had . . . engaged in a war with Alexander [the Great?]," by concluding that, like "other kings and nations [before him] . . . Alexander . . . would have found the Roman empire invincible."[17] In arriving at this conclusion, Livy resembled his illustrious predecessors in being guided by presentist motives. Writing at a time when Augustus was consolidating power and transforming Rome from a republic into an empire, Livy intended his tale to serve as a cautionary lesson about the contemporary dangers of one-man rule.[18] Taken together, the observations of Livy, Herodotus, Thucydides, and Tacitus – not to mention similar hypothetical observations by Polybius and Plutarch – confirm that, from its very inception, the Greco-Roman historiographical tradition was particularly open to counterfactual speculation.[19]

Counterfactual history and the Jewish tradition

By contrast, the Jewish historiographical tradition has been less inclined to speculate about the past. The reasons for this are complex and require extensive explanation, not to mention a certain amount of qualification. To begin with, it is certainly true that Jewish religious texts contain the kind of hypothetical thinking required for counterfactual historical speculation. Even a cursory glance through the Hebrew Bible reveals the presence of "what if?" statements. Early in the Book of Genesis, for example, after Adam eats from the tree of knowledge in the Garden of Eden, God worries that the first human may soon commit further transgressions, exclaiming, "What if he should stretch out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat?"[20] Later in Genesis, Abraham's effort to convince God not to punish the citizens of Sodom leads to a series of "what if?" questions involving the number of righteous citizens the patriarch would need to find in order to prevent the city's destruction (Abraham begins with fifty citizens and relentlessly bargains God down until finally asking, "What if ten should be found there?").[21] Later in Exodus, meanwhile, after God entrusts Moses with the task of guiding the Israelites to freedom, the reluctant leader anxiously asks God:

"What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me?"[22] On the face of it, these hypothetical statements would seem to qualify as "what ifs?" Yet, since they focus on the future instead of the past, they are not examples of counterfactual historical thinking.

The same is true of other conditional "if-then" statements that are found in the Jewish religious tradition. There are many such statements in the Hebrew Bible, a good number of which relate to God's covenant with the Jewish people, especially their obligation to uphold his divine laws. Some of these statements are phrased positively, as when God declares in Exodus 19:5: "If you will obey Me faithfully and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all the peoples."[23] Others are expressed negatively, as in Deuteronomy 8:19, where God asserts: "If you . . . forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve them . . . you shall certainly perish."[24] Like the "what if?" statements mentioned above, however, these are oriented toward the future instead of the past. The same applies to "if-then" declarations that appear in the realm of Jewish legal thought. In the Bible and especially in the Talmud, there are innumerable "if-then" rulings on myriad religious, social, and economic questions. Many of them are phrased in the past tense: for example, "if a man ate and forgot to say the benediction . . . [then] he must return to his place and say it."[25] "If a field was reaped by gentiles or robbers . . . [then] it is exempt from Peah [the law of leaving gleanings]."[26] Yet these and other similar conditional statements, despite being phrased in the past tense, are meant to serve as guides to present or future behavior. Moreover, they pertain strictly to personal acts and have no counterfactual relevance for the course of historical events.

Also failing to qualify are specific historical episodes in the Bible, Talmud, and other religious texts that have hypothetical components. When the Babylonians are besieging Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE, the Book of Jeremiah, 38:17–18, portrays God telling King Zedekiah that "If you surrender to the officers of the King of Babylon, your life will be spared and this city will not be burned down. You and your household will live. But if you do not surrender . . . this city will be given into the hands of the Chaldeans who will burn it down."[27] This statement introduces the factor of contingency to historical events, but it does so mostly as a future-oriented prophecy of what will happen pending a given decision. This is also true of the Talmudic story that God offered King Hezekiah the chance to become the Messiah after his

victory over the Assyrian King Sennacherib, in the year 701 BCE, but because Hezekiah failed to sing God's praises, he lost his opportunity.[28] The rabbis, however, did not go on to explore the consequences of this "road not taken" in a historical sense and instead devoted their attention to determining the theological reasons for (and implications of) Hezekiah's failure to sing for God.[29] Similarly, in Isaiah 48:18, following the Temple's destruction by the Babylonians, God admonishes the Israelites by saying, "If only you would heed My commands! Then your prosperity would be like a river, your triumph like waves of the sea."[30] This statement comes closer to expressing a counterfactual mindset, but it ultimately fails to qualify, as it does not so much depict a specific historical outcome as a general moral–religious lesson. The same can even be said about the famous Passover song, "Dayenu," which never fully explores what actually might have happened if God had not acted as he did.[31]

To be sure, some counterfactual statements about the Jewish past do appear here and there in the Jewish religious and intellectual tradition. Beyond the famous episode from Exodus, in which the starving Israelites fantasize about being back in Egypt, there is a nearly identical one in the Book of Numbers, where the Israelites say the same thing almost verbatim when told about Moses' plan to invade Canaan.[32] Fears about looming military defeat also inform a lament that appears in Joshua 7:7, when the Israelites, having been told of a looming battle with the Amorites, exclaim, "If only we had been content to remain on the other side of the Jordan!"[33] In each of these instances, apprehension about the present prompts the Israelites to fantasize about a preferable historical outcome. A different sentiment is expressed in Psalm 124, which asserts: "Were it not for the Lord, who was on our side when men assailed us, they would have swallowed us alive in their burning rage against us."[34] This nightmare scenario – reputedly written by King David following his victory over the Philistines – is a psalm of thanksgiving, an expression of gratitude for history turning out as it did. These statements are more legitimate expressions of hypothetical historical thinking, but they only make up a tiny fraction of the Tanach. Moreover, they all focus on a religious theme – the Israelites' relationship with God – and do not pertain to the realm of secular historical causality like the aforementioned instances from Greek and Roman historiography.

The exception that proves the rule is found in the work of the Jewish historian, Flavius Josephus (Figure 2). In his famous book,

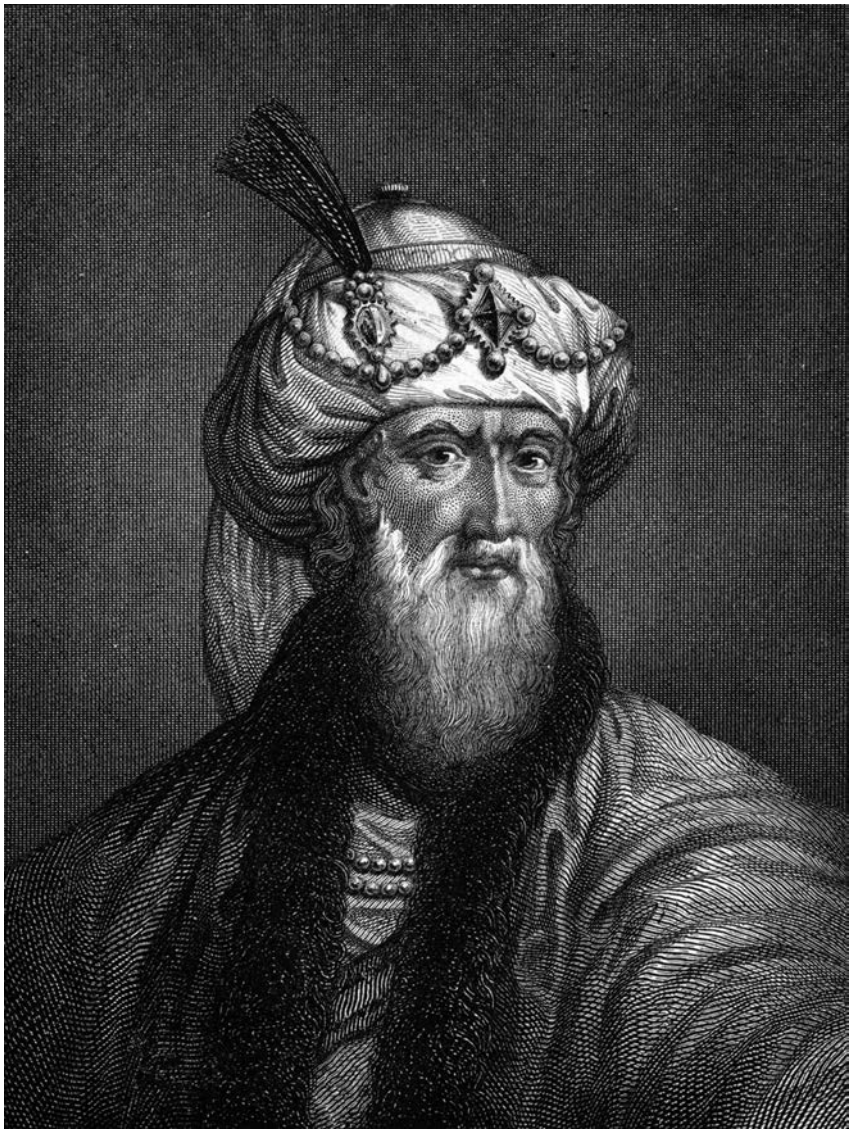

Figure 2. Woodcut of Flavius Josephus from William Whiston's translation of *Antiquities of the Jews* (1737). The Jewish historian Josephus (*ca.* 37–100 CE) was the exception to the rule in the Jewish historiographical tradition, as he was willing to speculate counterfactually about the Jewish past.

The Jewish War, Josephus discusses the case of the Jewish high priest, Ananus, who was opposed to the rule of the Zealots in Jerusalem during the Revolt of 66–70 CE and tried – correctly, in Josephus' pro-Roman estimation – to surrender the city peacefully to the Roman imperial

army. Ananus was murdered by the Idumeans, who were let into the city by the Zealots to purge those they regarded as collaborators. Viewing this decision as tragic and avoidable, Josephus concluded, "had Ananus survived . . . an accommodation [with the Romans] would have been effected . . . [If] he had been spared . . . the Jews . . . would have greatly retarded the triumph of the Romans."[35] Josephus' statement was in the same counterfactual style as the assertions of Herodotus and Thucydides. But it was exceptional. As a scholar who was influenced by Greek historiography and emphasized secular causality, Josephus stood outside the normative Jewish historiographical tradition. His speculative comment was thus unrepresentative of the Jewish historical mindset, which remained rooted in its biblical paradigm.[36]

If we accept the premise that the Jewish tradition was generally averse to counterfactual speculation, the question that needs to be answered is "why?" Many scholars have written about the nature of Jewish historical consciousness and the forces that have shaped it. Their work suggests that the absence of counterfactual speculation is rooted in the deterministic and teleological character of Jewish historiography and historical consciousness. Beginning in antiquity, the Jewish people began to perceive their history as an expression of divine will, a reflection of a divine plan. They interpreted their experiences – whether successes or failures – as rewards and punishments for their behavior. History's course was a barometer of God's commitment to the Jewish people, which varied according to their own level of commitment to the divine covenant. The civil war between Israel and Judah, the defeats by the Assyrians and Babylonians, the destruction of the first Temple, the exile and eventual return to Jerusalem – all of these events were interpreted by the prophets, especially Jeremiah and Isaiah, as reflections of Jewish moral failings and ensuing repentance. This perspective helped solidify a Jewish view of history that was teleological, proceeding toward a specific (religious) goal: the end of days and the coming of the Messiah.[37] For obvious reasons, this historical sensibility discouraged counterfactual speculation. The notion that history's course had to unfold according to a specific plan minimized the role of contingency in historical events. It discouraged reflection on how, but for a different variable here or there, everything might have turned out differently.

The Jewish sense that history was divinely ordered and deterministic differed sharply from the contemporaneous Greek view of history and explains why the former was less prone to counterfactual

speculation than the latter. History, in the Greek tradition, lacked the linear quality of Jewish historical consciousness; unlike the Jews, the Greeks did not see history proceeding toward a larger goal.[38] This difference reflected the polytheistic nature of the Greek religion, which imagined the Gods continually fighting without any clear direction or predictable outcome.[39] However, the Greeks did not just differ from the Jews in seeing history as the expression of chaos instead of a divine plan. As Greek historiography transitioned from the work of Herodotus to that of Thucydides, it also became more secularized. It began to deemphasize the role of the Gods in human affairs and instead sought answers for history's course in the "mechanisms of human society."[40] This secularization of historical consciousness was crucial, as it enabled the Greeks to appreciate the role of chance in history and opened up the possibility of imagining alternate outcomes to it. In short, the case of Greek historiography shows how the emergence of secular forms of historical consciousness was a necessary – though not sufficient – precondition for counterfactual speculation.

The deterministic character of Jewish historical consciousness was further consolidated with the onset of the diaspora. With this development, Jews lost what had traditionally been the subject of most historical writing in the Near East – political power. In Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Persia, historiography had traditionally assumed the form of chronicles and annals focusing on lists of royal succession and military victories (defeats were left undocumented). As long as the Jews enjoyed political authority in the unified monarchy (and even after the split), they too recorded such history.[41] But after the destruction of the Second Temple, profane history ceased to matter. Without political power, the Jews became the objects of history instead of active subjects in it.[42] The rabbis did not write history, which goes without mention in the tannaitic or amoritic literature in the years 50–500 CE.[43] They felt that the Bible contained all the historical lessons that the Jewish people needed and thus preserved the biblical tradition of seeing "obedience and rebellion as determinative of Israel's [historical] fate."[44] They continued to see historical events as a response to Jewish virtue and sin. Indeed, the very meaning of history was determined by Jewish suffering and how it proved God's power.[45] Talmudic interpretations of the Second Temple's destruction, for example, perceived the event as the predictable result of "idolatry, immorality, and bloodshed."[46] The rabbis, believing that God had distanced himself from his people, turned away from

interpreting contemporary political events and toward reinterpreting Biblical history, producing volumes of Midrashic readings that reflect a nostalgic yearning for an era when Israel still enjoyed divine favor and political autonomy. The rabbinic dedication to halakha symbolized the Jewish preference for the law over history.[47]

This pattern changed little prior to the onset of modernity. During the Middle Ages, Jews continued to show little interest in historical research and writing. It was emblematic that the era's most famous Jewish philosopher, Moses Maimonides, contended that history was a "sheer waste of time."[48] To be sure, certain dramatic historical events, such as the Crusades, stimulated attention to contemporary history (and produced new methods of documentation, like *Memorbücher*, or memorial books). Yet these events were still interpreted from a religious perspective. Suffering was still seen as punishment for sin. Indeed, as Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi famously argued in *Zakhor*, medieval Jews developed a typological method of using biblical archetypes to make sense of present-day events, viewing "the latest oppressor [as] . . . Haman," perceiving "Christendom [as] . . . 'Edom,'" and affixing "geographical names . . . from the Bible . . . to places the Bible never knew . . . so [that] Spain is 'Sefarad' . . . [and] Germany is 'Ashkenaz.'"[49] There were few exceptions to this pattern. During the Renaissance, there was a brief upsurge in Jewish historiography, epitomized by Azariah de Rossi's *Meor Enayim*, which exhibited something of a modern rationalist attention to the use of evidence and the pursuit of historical truth. But the total number of histories produced by Jews in this period was small, especially compared with Christian scholarship.[50] Indeed, while Christian scholars were prompted by the humanist movement to depart from the medieval tradition of "ecclesiastical historiography" and inaugurate "the rebirth of political and military historiography," Jewish scholars found this topic "irrelevant," given their impotent political status, and remained mired in premodern patterns for several more centuries.[51]

Only with the dawn of the nineteenth century did Jews finally return to writing history. Even then, however, they did not entirely distance themselves from prior traditions. The rise of modern "scientific" historiography profoundly changed Jewish historical writing by leading Jewish historians to foreground secular causality instead of divine will in crafting their historical narratives. Yet, in important ways, Jewish historiography preserved a teleological orientation. Jewish historians, despite pledging allegiance to standards of scientific

objectivity, imposed totalizing narratives upon the Jewish past in the attempt to lend it a sense of unity.[52] This holistic (and often ideological) impulse led Jewish historians to portray the past as evolving in a linear direction toward one telos or another. The pioneering historians associated with the early nineteenth-century Wissenschaft des Judentums movement, such as Isaak Markus Jost and Leopold Zunz, for example, focused on historicizing the evolution of Judaism as a spiritual idea, believing that doing so would promote the goals of religious reform and civil emancipation. Later historians, such as Heinrich Graetz and Simon Dubnow, took a more nationalistic turn and focused on the development of the Jews as an independent people, believing that asserting Jewish nationhood would bring political benefits to Jews in Central and Eastern Europe. This trend paved the way for later Zionist historians, such as Yitzhak Baer, to represent Jewish history as a long struggle between *Galut* and nationhood, between the defeatist forces of assimilation and the heroic ones of national persistence. Even "acculturationist" historians, such as Salo Baron, saw a directionality to Jewish history, viewing it as focused on the struggle to preserve the Jewish people's distinctiveness while interacting with the larger gentile world.[53] These historians' work was not deterministic in the strict sense of the term, and they should hardly be seen as secular versions of the biblical view that Jewish existence was divinely guided. Yet their ideological tendencies may have made them less open to the play of chance and contingency.

Perhaps for this reason, Jewish historians generally offered few counterfactual observations in their work. This is not to say that such observations were entirely absent. Indeed, in the process of embracing modern historiographical methodologies and practices, nineteenth-century Jewish historians, like their Christian colleagues, gradually began to make counterfactual remarks in their historical writing. Isaak Markus Jost, for example, hypothesized that the Bar Kochba rebellion "might have erupted already in the years 122–3 [CE] had the emperor [Hadrian] not traveled to the east."[54] He later observed that the eleventh-century Spanish Jewish thinker, Solomon ibn Gabirol, "doubtless would have achieved more had he been granted a longer life."[55] Heinrich Graetz also offered counterfactual musings in his work. He speculated that Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar's successor, Amel-Marduk, "might have been persuaded to let the [Jewish] exiles return home, with Jehoiachin as king, had his own death not intervened."[56] He also hypothesized that had the Jews "awaited a more

favorable moment" to rebel against Rome, "success might have been [theirs]."[57] Other scholars were prone to making occasional counterfactual speculations as well. In the early twentieth century, Simon Dubnow wrote that the "terrible upheavals [of the years 1903–6] might have proved fatal to Russian Israel had it not, during the preceding period, worked out for itself a definite nationalistic attitude towards the non-Jewish world . . . [and] demanded their rights in full . . . as an autonomous nation among other nations with a culture of its own."[58] Salo Baron, meanwhile, later declared in his *Social and Religious History of the Jews* that "one may doubt whether [the Jewish] . . . religion would have been born . . . without the towering mentality of Moses."[59]

These counterfactual observations were notable for their novelty, but their significance is uncertain. On the one hand, they testified to the increasingly modern character of Jewish historiography. They confirmed that the secularization of historical consciousness was a precondition for counterfactual speculation and showed that Jewish historians were coming to resemble their Christian colleagues. During this period, counterfactual observations were increasingly finding expression in Western historical and sociological scholarship, as was shown by their appearance in the work of Edward Gibbon, Thomas Babington Macaulay, Jacob Burckhardt, G. M. Trevelyan, Heinrich von Treitschke, Arnold Toynbee, John Stuart Mill, and Max Weber.[60] Jewish historians were thus in good company in making their own speculative assertions. Yet, in an important respect, their willingness to speculate remained limited. While Jewish historians were prepared to make fleeting counterfactual observations about the past, they never went on to fully explore their possible consequences by producing more extended works of counterfactual history.

This absence was underscored by the increasing willingness of non-Jews to do so. At the very same time that the modern historical profession was coming into its own during the nineteenth century, counterfactual history was beginning to emerge as an independent genre of narrative representation. Ironically, the first examples of the genre were produced by figures from outside the historical profession, mostly novelists and other fiction writers. Unlike historians, whose positivist commitment to scientific objectivity made them loath to produce extended narratives founded on subjective speculation, fiction writers eagerly gave free rein to their imaginations and produced numerous literary examples of alternate history.[61] The first major

narratives were novel-length texts from France: Louis-Napoleon Geoffroy-Château's 1836 narrative, *Napoleon et la conquête du monde 1812–1832*, Joseph Méry's 1854 novella, *Histoire de ce qui n'est pas arrivé*, and Charles Renouvier's 1857 novel, *Uchronie*.[62] These texts, which mostly focused on the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte (or which critiqued the rule of his nephew, Napoleon III), confirmed the tendency of counterfactual speculation to thrive in nations that stand at the center of pivotal historical events. This supposition was further confirmed by the fact that most other alternate histories that appeared before the year 1900 were published in Great Britain and the United States. Significantly, they were produced nearly entirely by Christian authors. This pattern continued in the next half-century leading up to the start of World War II. Although the number of counterfactual and alternate histories increased substantially during this period, hardly any were written by Jews.[63]

The absence of Jewish voices from this literary output was due to several factors. To a degree, the small size of alternate history as a fledgling genre in this early period made it statistically unlikely that many texts would be authored by Jews. But Jewish literary tendencies were also involved. Although Jews were increasingly prominent as fiction writers in this period, they were concentrated in more traditional literary genres. They were accomplished in realist fiction (I. J. Singer), folk literature (Sholom Aleichem), and modernism (Franz Kafka). But they were less represented in the larger literary genre to which alternate history belonged: speculative literature. This genre, which includes fantasy, horror, and science fiction, did not entirely lack Jewish representatives; but where they appeared, Jewish authors focused less on the past than the future. They shied away from the backward-looking genre of fantasy, for example, in favor of the forward-looking genre of science fiction.[64] This emphasis dovetailed with the penchant of many Jews in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to embrace utopian thinking. Seen in the growing support among Jews for Zionism and Socialism, this thinking was highly teleological and less concerned with changing the course of bygone events than shaping those still to come. This impulse was epitomized by Theodor Herzl's utopian novel, *Altneuland* (1902), which expressed the Zionist goal of dialectically transcending the Jewish past in the pursuit of a future ideal.[65] All of these trends inhibited Jews from making a major contribution to the emerging genre of counterfactual history.

Only once counterfactual history began to enter the cultural mainstream after 1945 did Jewish contributions slowly start to appear. The early postwar years were marked by the publication of major alternate history novels. Among the most famous in the 1950s and 1960s were Ward Moore's *Bring the Jubilee* (1954), Philip K. Dick's *The Man in the High Castle* (1962), and Keith Roberts' *Pavane* (1968). They were joined in subsequent decades by other well-regarded texts, such as Kingsley Amis's *The Alteration* (1976), Len Deighton's *SS-GB* (1978), and Terry Bisson's *Fire on the Mountain* (1988). By the 1990s and after the turn of the millennium, the appearance of other novels, such as Robert Harris's *Fatherland* (1992), brought alternate history increasing media attention and heightened prominence. The growing interest in "what if?" questions reflected the political and cultural climate of the *fin de siècle*. It reflected the rise of postmodernism, which questioned the belief in metanarratives and objective truth; the end of the Cold War, which discredited deterministic modes of thinking; and the information revolution, which created a new receptivity for "virtual" modes of existence separated from reality.[66] Against the backdrop of these trends, Jewish writers became increasingly active in producing alternate histories. Although their contribution to the genre was initially modest – few novels or short stories were penned by Jewish writers prior to the 1970s – they produced important works thereafter. Indeed, two of the most prominent, in terms of critical and popular success, were Philip Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004) and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007), both of which helped lend alternate history greater legitimacy. Moreover, the most prominent figure associated with the genre today is the Jewish writer, Harry Turtledove, the author of nearly one hundred alternate history novels and short stories, including the influential *Guns of the South* (1992).[67] All of these developments confirmed the capacity of Jews to engage in counterfactual speculation.

Unlike Jewish fiction writers, however, Jewish historians did not participate much in the new engagement with counterfactual history. Their avoidance stood in stark contrast to the trend within the general historical profession, which displayed an increasing openness to counterfactual speculation. Thanks in part to the rise of postmodernism, which helped undermine the longstanding belief in historical objectivity and truth, historians began to overcome their traditional aversion to asking "what if?" questions and increasingly tried their hand at

crafting counterfactual narratives about the past. Starting in the mid 1990s, growing numbers of historians began to publish essays in high-profile collections, including Niall Ferguson's edited anthology, *Virtual History* (1997); Robert Cowley's edited volumes, *What If? Military Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (1999), *More What If?: Eminent Historians Imagine What Might Have Been* (2001), and *What Ifs? of American History* (2003); and similar volumes by Andrew Roberts, Jeremy Black, and Philip E. Tetlock, Richard Ned Lebow, and Geoffrey Parker.[68] These important studies featured little work by scholars of Jewish history, however. More recently, individual academic monographs have begun to employ counterfactual reasoning prominently in their analyses, including Henry Turner's *Hitler's Thirty Days to Power* (2003), Frank Harvey's *Explaining the Iraq War: Counterfactual Theory, Logic, and Evidence* (2012), and Peter Bowler's *Darwin Deleted: Imagining a World Without Darwin* (2013).[69] Thus far, however, Jewish historians have not embraced this trend either.[70] To be sure, Jewish scholars and journalists have occasionally published short speculative essays in the popular press. Especially in Israel, figures like Uri Avneri, Yehoshafat Harkabi, Amnon Rubinstein, Yaacov Shavit, and Benny Morris have written scattered Hebrew-language essays about pivotal turning points in the Jewish state's modern history, such as the 1967 war and the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin.[71] But these works have been exceptional. For the most part, Jewish historians have yet to tap the potential of counterfactual history.

This lack of interest arguably reflects a longstanding disciplinary conservatism within the field of Jewish history. Jewish historians have never been methodological pioneers. Ever since the rise of Wissenschaft des Judentums, according to David Myers, they have largely adhered to a kind of "hyper-scientism." Indeed, they have adhered to the ideals of objectivity for far longer than their non-Jewish colleagues in the historical profession.[72] Although they have consistently embraced new methodological developments – going along with the shift to social, intellectual, and cultural history in recent decades – they have tended to be late, rather than early, adopters. This methodological conservatism has kept Jewish historians from pursuing work within the field of counterfactual history with the same enthusiasm and in the same numbers as scholars in other fields of historical specialization.

There is reason to believe, however, that this reluctance may be coming to an end. In recent years, Jewish historians have begun to

embrace some of the same intellectual trends that have nurtured the rise of counterfactual history, especially postmodernism. As is shown by a spate of recent studies, Jewish historians have wrestled seriously with the implications of postmodern theory for their profession.[73] Certainly since the publication of Yerushalmi's study, *Zakhor*, Jewish historians have taken an "introspective turn" and become more self-reflexive about their field, admitting to their subjective authorial positions and embracing new postmodern methodologies. As Michael Brenner has written, they have embraced the postmodern hostility toward metanarratives and abandoned "any attempt to write a comprehensive Jewish history," preferring instead to write "a multitude of 'small narratives' constituting a kind of counterhistory in relation to traditional historiographical narratives."[74] Given these trends, Jewish historians are in a perfect position – both methodologically and temperamentally – to make their own long overdue contributions to the field of counterfactual history. What better way is there to challenge the reigning metanarratives about the Jewish past than to explore alternative scenarios that never happened? Indeed, if we are to realize Moshe Rosman's call to create a genuinely "postmodern Jewish historiography," Jewish historians will have to take up the challenge of counterfactual history and confront the fundamental question, "what if?"[75]

"What ifs?" of Jewish history

This volume seeks to advance this process by inviting a distinguished group of Jewish Studies scholars – from the fields of history, religious studies, and literature – to explore a series of provocative counterfactual questions. These questions span the ancient, medieval, and modern periods of Jewish history and address a variety of pivotal topics in Europe, the Middle East, and the United States. The book's early chapters deal with the formation of the Jewish people in antiquity, the centrality of the Temple, the onset of medieval persecutions, and the gradual appearance of the *Haskalah*, or Jewish Enlightenment. Later chapters then proceed to concentrate on the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and address the rise of antisemitism, the emergence of Zionism, the eruption of the First and Second World Wars, the occurrence of the Holocaust, and the creation of the state of Israel. In approaching these topics, the volume's authors draw upon their own unique disciplinary expertise to imagine how key events in the Jewish past might

have unfolded differently. They pursue this task by adopting a wide range of narrative approaches. Some employ a straightforward analytical style and present readers with provocative claims about history transpiring otherwise; others adopt a more experimental, literary approach that invites readers to infer the meandering course of historical events. In so doing, the contributors advance varied conclusions. Many propose robust changes to the Jewish historical record; others submit more modest claims; some even question the entire speculative enterprise and insist that history more or less had to turn out as it did. Taken together, the chapters' varied content and eclectic form combine to produce a highly stimulating journey through Jewish history as it never was.

Steven Weitzman, a scholar of the Hebrew Bible and early Judaism, begins the volume by examining how Jewish history would have unfolded if the Exodus from Egypt had never occurred, asserting that nearly every feature of Jewish history would have been different – if indeed the Jews would have survived at all. The classicist and Jewish Studies scholar, René Bloch, then examines what might have happened had the Romans never destroyed the Second Temple in Jerusalem, proposing that rabbinic Judaism and early Christianity would have developed very differently, while Jewish life in the diaspora would have proceeded largely unchanged. Historian Jonathan Ray addresses how the history of Sephardic Jewry would have developed without the expulsion from Spain, contrasting the success of the Spanish Jewish community with the comparative suffering of Maghrebi and Polish-Lithuanian Jews. Historian Bernard Cooperman inquires how early modern Jewish history would have developed without the creation of ghettos, concluding that they were an inevitable response to late medieval needs and should be seen as a less onerous feature of Jewish life than has traditionally been believed. Historian Eugene Sheppard tackles the provocative question of how Jewish intellectual history would have evolved had the eminent philosopher Baruch Spinoza repented for his heretical beliefs, showing how a range of European Jewish thinkers would have wrestled with the philosopher's "return" to Judaism. Rounding out this section of the book, historian Jeffrey Veidlinger examines how the history of Eastern European Jewry would have unfolded if Empress Catherine the Great had never established the Pale of Settlement in Russia, presenting two different visions of how they would have been affected by the granting of greater communal autonomy or the imposition of forced integration.

The next section of the book addresses the history of Zionism and the founding of the state of Israel. Historian Derek Penslar proposes that a German victory in World War I might have led to the creation of a Protestant, instead of a Jewish, state in Palestine, provocatively suggesting that it would have engendered an equally hostile reaction from its Arab neighbors. Literature scholar Adam Rovner provides a grand tour of the history and contemporary sights of the Jewish state of New Judea, located in the former British colony of Uganda. Literature scholar Iris Bruce explores how Franz Kafka's emigration to Palestine in the early 1920s would have shaped the famed writer's fiction and subsequent literary reputation. Political scientist Kenneth Stein takes a very different viewpoint and argues that if Arab political leaders in Palestine had agreed to any number of British and American plans for limited self-governance from the early 1920s onwards, they might have been able to establish a Palestinian state by the end of the 1930s and possibly even hindered the creation of a Jewish state. Finally, historian David Myers imagines what would have happened if Palestinian Arab leader Musa Alami and Zionist leader David Ben-Gurion had been able to forge a power-sharing arrangement for Jews and Arabs under broad British Mandatory control, proposing that it might have given rise to a binational state.

The book's final cluster of chapters deals with the history of German Jewry, the Second World War, and the Holocaust. Historian Michael Brenner takes up the question of how German Jewish history would have evolved if Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau had escaped assassination in 1922, proposing that the Weimar Republic would have survived and German Jews would have thrived in the subsequent decades. Historian Gavriel Rosenfeld explores how Adolf Hitler's assassination by Georg Elser in November of 1939 would have limited, but not prevented, the mass murder of German and Polish Jews. Historian Jeffrey Herf underscores the pivotal importance of the battle of El Alamein for preventing the Nazis from invading Palestine and extending the Final Solution of the Jewish Question to the Jews of the Yishuv. Historian Dirk Rupnow explores how the Jewish people would have been remembered in a world in which the Nazis won the Second World War and completed the Final Solution. Finally, historian Jeffrey Gurock examines how an earlier start to World War II in 1938 and the prevention of the Holocaust would have had unexpectedly negative consequences for American Jews.

In answering their counterfactual questions, the volume's contributors imagine Jewish history unfolding in many different ways. Some envision it turning out better; others portray it turning out worse; still others imagine it remaining more or less the same. They also illuminate different aspects of Jewish history. Some address issues of historical causality; others reflect on the conundrums of historical judgment; and still others reflect on the workings of historical memory. The diverse approaches and diverging conclusions of the chapters – indeed, the existence of explicit contradictions between some of them – is one of the volume's distinguishing hallmarks. Unlike many historical anthologies, it does not operate within a single historiographical paradigm or seek to advance a particular scholarly consensus. Indeed, the volume lays no special claim to truth. Although its contributors possess tremendous expertise in their respective disciplines, their chapters are works of speculation and thus unavoidably subjective. They are defined as much by the personal as the empirical, by the forces of the imagination as the imperatives of documentation. This subjectivity is visible in the presentist character of many of the chapters. The ways in which they imagine Jewish history turning out better or worse subtly express a range of fantasies and fears. Discerning readers will be able to detect how present-day concerns about the legacy of the Holocaust and the future of the state of Israel, for example, color many of the chapters' counterfactual claims. Some readers may object that the chapters' subjectivity limits their plausibility; they may contend that their conclusions are needlessly pessimistic or naïvely optimistic. But they should bear in mind that they seek to be suggestive rather than authoritative. They aim to raise as many questions as they answer.

In the end, *What Ifs of Jewish History* may be just as likely to provoke as convince. But this, too, is an important part of its mission. The volume seeks to challenge conventional views about Jewish history by proposing new perspectives about how it might have been. Readers will ultimately decide for themselves whether or not they find these perspectives to be compelling. But by prompting questions, discussion, and debate, wondering "what if?" may allow new insights into the Jewish past. It may even help us understand how it might unfold in the future.